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CAMDEN, N.J.
COURIER-POST

e. 84,484

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Date: JAN 14 1964

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CIA Seeks New Public Image

It was a significant "first" when the Central Intelligence Agency held a press conference the other day.

Its former director, Allen W. Dulles, used to tell about some of its findings in occasional speeches. It has briefed individual correspondents on the news from time to time. It has also permitted its analysts to give certain information to the press, but strictly on a background, non-attributable basis.

The present CIA director, John A. McCone, and his aides have complained that the agency was losing prestige. Its appearances in the news resulted only from such notable intelligence failures as the U-2 incident in Russia in 1960, the Cuban invasion flop in 1961, and 1963 policy disputes over South Vietnam.

So McCone decided to hold the agency's first news conference — although as an experiment only. About 20 newsmen were briefed on the CIA's analyses of recent developments in the Soviet Union.

Some of these reports were quite different from those previously heard from other sources. The CIA men said, for instance, that Russia's economic growth rate has dropped from its former 6 per cent to 2.5 per cent in the last two years. They said that Soviet gold reserves have fallen to $2 billion and that Moscow will have to borrow heavily and import machinery from the West to finance further industrial expansion.

Costly defense and space programs, plus agricultural failures, according to the CIA analysts, account for the Soviet slump. They estimated farm production in 1963 as 10 per cent lower than in 1958.

Experts may question some of the CIA statistics. Some of the statistics may be wrong. But the nation has respect and confidence in the CIA despite its mishaps and the obvious fact it is not infallible.

The agency makes no effort to deny, however, that it wants a better public "image" than it has, and that it may have made a mistake in keeping its operations so ultra-secret.

The deep secrecy may have in part grown out of former President Eisenhower's great trust and dependence on the late Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, which carried over to his brother Allen.

Nevertheless the CIA, like any other major agency of the Government, ought to receive as much publicity as possible. Granted that "possible," in its case, cannot mean wide open and unlimited publicity, the more it can tell the public without harm to its operations the better.

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